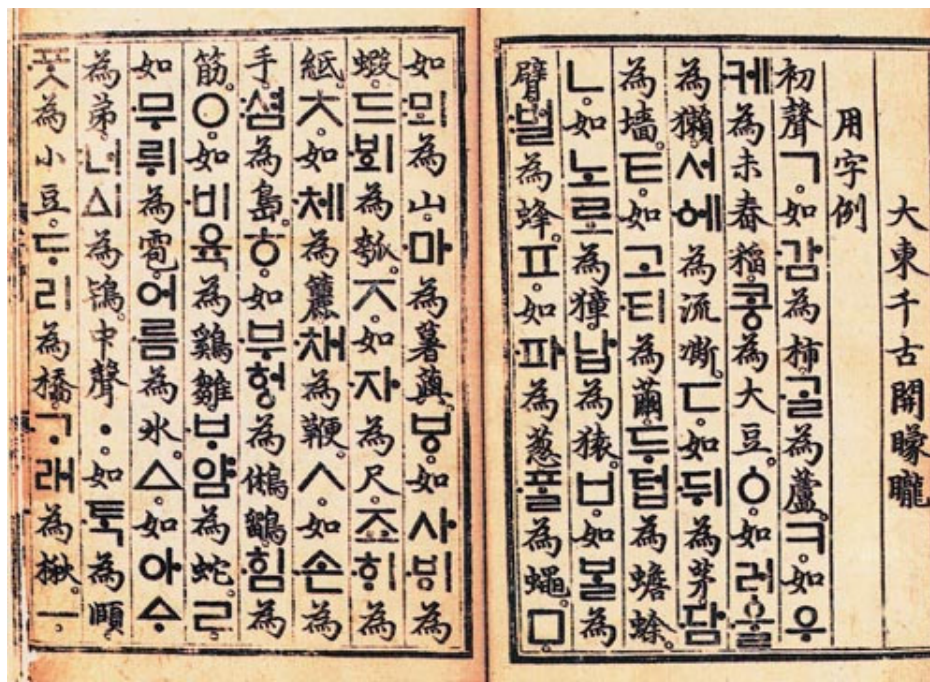


Hangeul, The Korean Alphabet

Seong Myeong Su Daesaseong, OL, Barony of South Downs, Kingdom of Meridies

In 1446, King Sejong the Great proclaimed that a new alphabet would be put in place in Joseon (1392-1897). Before this, Chinese characters, called *hanja*, were used in Korea as the writing system. Memorizing and writing the complicated characters lead many people to be illiterate, especially the commoners and the poor. King Sejong wanted to create a system that would allow all of his people to be able to read and write their complaints to people in positions of power. In 1443, he put a group of scholars to the task of developing an alphabet that would represent the Korean language phonetically. The end result was an alphabet with 17 consonants and 11 vowels, which would later be standardized to 14 consonants and 10 vowels in 1933.¹ The original alphabet was published in 1446 in a document called *Hunminjeongeum*, which translates to “The Correct/Proper Sounds for the Instruction of the People.”²



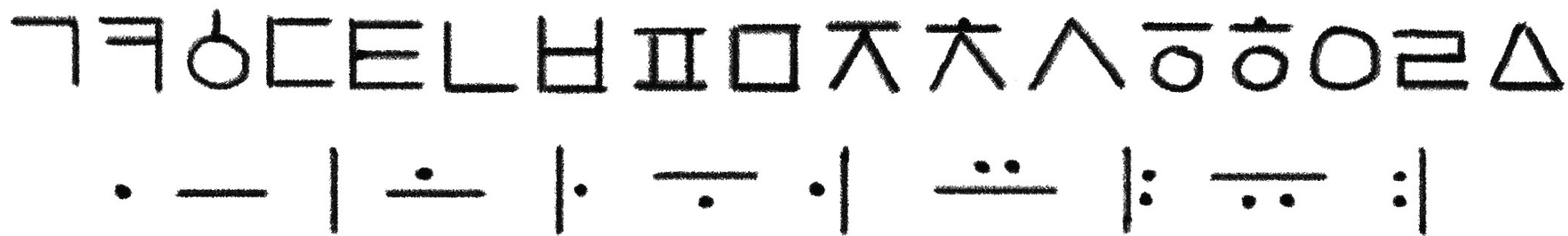
Spread from the *Hunminjeongeum*, showing both Chinese and Korean characters.



Statue of King Sejong the Great at Deoksugung Palace. The original hangeul characters are on the plaque under his name.

By Lawinc82 - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=15349246>

1 Focuson Korea V.2: Korean History. (Seoul International Pub. House, 1986), 60.
2 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hunminjeongeum>



Top row: original consonants, bottom row: original vowels. Characters copied from statue plaque.

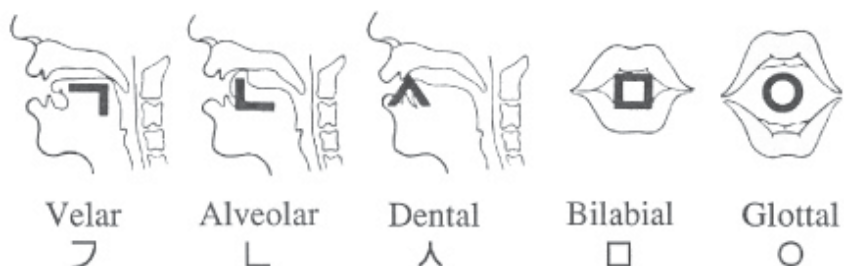


Diagram showing the characters in relation to the tongue position and mouth shapes.

<http://www.wright-house.com/korean/korean-linguistics-origins.html>

Since the alphabet was created instead of evolving naturally, there were some deliberate choices made when creating the characters. The consonant characters were created by drawing the position of the tongue in the mouth and the mouth shape when making certain sounds. The modern consonants are organized by the five categories on the left. These five are known as the “First Sounds.”

The vowel characters were created to show where in the mouth the vowel was formed, high/low, front/back, as well as the concepts of “light” and “dark,” similar to the concept of yin and yang, along with a few neutral vowels. The elements in the vowels also represent heaven, earth, and man and the balance of the three.³

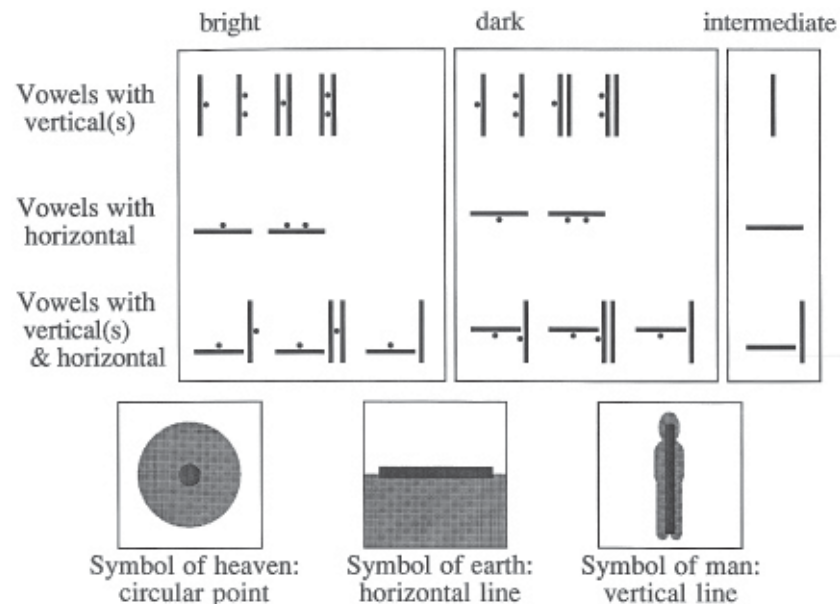
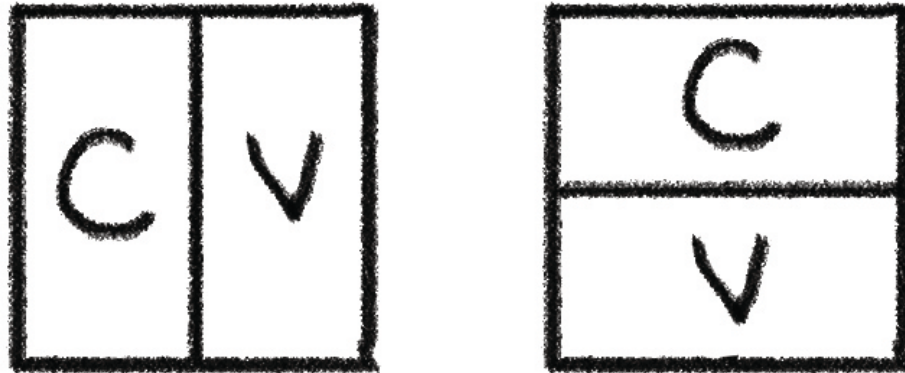


Diagram showing the vowel concepts and visual representation of heaven, earth, and man.

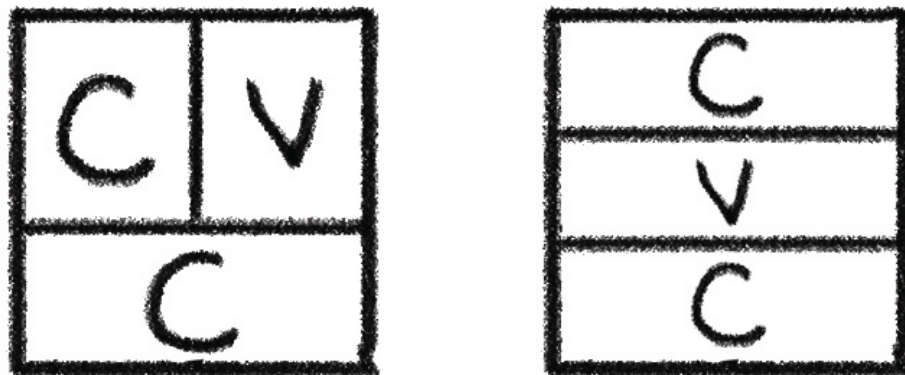
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Syllable Blocks

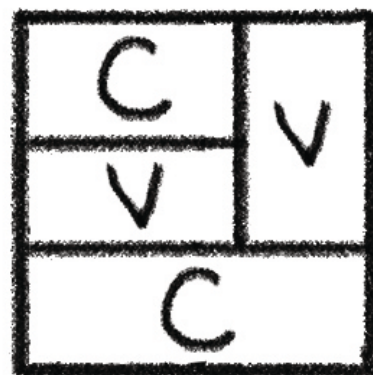
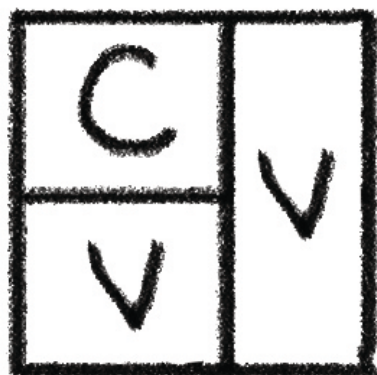
To create words using *hangeul*, consonants and vowels are combined into a block for every syllable. The characters are read from left to right, top to bottom within the block and every syllable block must have at least one consonant and one vowel. Let's start with some basic syllable blocks:



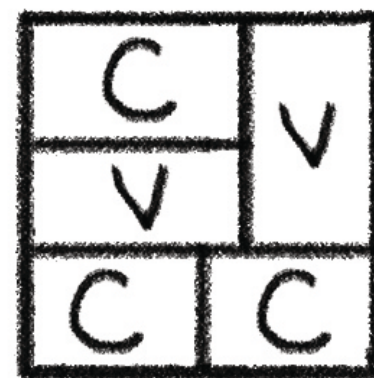
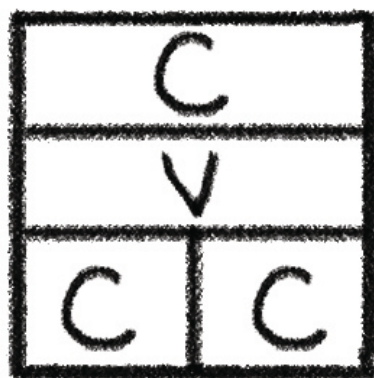
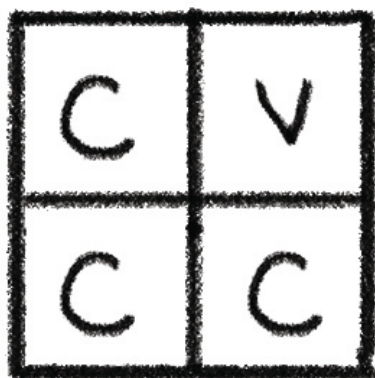
The consonant comes first in the block and the vowel orientation and position depends on the orientation of the vowel. If the vowel has a vertical line, it is to the right of the consonant, if the vowel has a horizontal line, it is below the consonant. You read the block from left to right, top to bottom, combining the sounds of the consonant and vowel into one sound. This is the very basic structure of a syllable block.



You can also add a consonant at the bottom of the syllable block, ending the syllable with the consonant sound. The position of the ending consonant is on the bottom, regardless of vowel orientation. This bottom consonant is called *batchim*.



Vowels can be combined in the same syllable block and can also have a consonant on the bottom as well.



Last, you can also have two different consonants in the bottom position. There are specific pronunciation rules depending on which consonant pairs are in the bottom position, but we will not be covering them here.

Consonants

Using the 14 consonants and 10 vowels in use in modern *hangeul*, here are the sounds for the characters. The sound the consonant makes depends on the position in the syllable block. The first letter is the pronunciation when it is the leading consonant, the second letter is the pronunciation when the consonant is in the bottom position.

Consonants													
ㄱ	ㄴ	ㄷ	ㄹ	ㅁ	ㅂ	ㅅ	ㅇ	ㅈ	ㅊ	ㅋ	ㅌ	ㅍ	ㅎ
g/k	n/n	d/t	r/l	m/m	b/p	s/t	-/ng*	j/t	ch/t	k/k	t/t	p/p	h/t

*When using ㅇ in the first position, the consonant acts as a placeholder as only the sound of the vowel is pronounced. When in the bottom position, it is pronounced “ng.”

Double Consonants				
ㄱㄱ	ㄷㄷ	ㅂㅂ	ㅅㅅ	ㅈㅈ
kk/k	tt/-	pp/-	ss/t	jj/-

Hangeul also has characters that are double consonants of some of the basic consonants. They are known as tensed consonants and are stressed when pronounced. Pronunciation in the first position is first, and pronunciation in the bottom position is second.

*The - symbol for the second letter means that these characters are not used in the bottom position.

Vowels

The dots in the original vowels eventually changed into strokes in the same positions. The vowel pronunciation is consistent and does not change. To use the vowel sound alone, you must use the placeholder consonant ㅇ. Here are the vowels using modern *hangeul* characters.

Vowels									
a	ya	eo	yeo	o	yo	u	yu	eu	i

Like the consonants, there are vowels that can be called double vowels. These are formed by putting together the vowel characters to create one combined sound.

Double Vowels										
ae	yae	e	ye	wa	wae	woe	wo	we	wi	ui

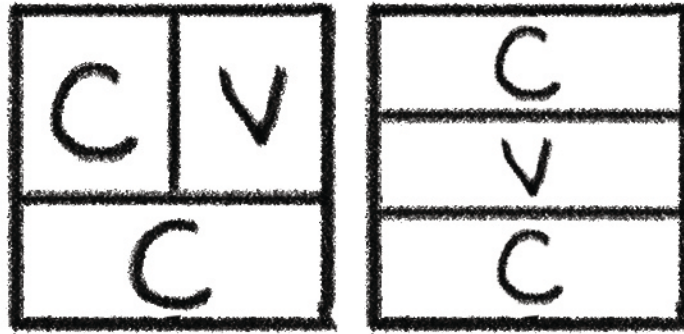
Note: I use the Revised Romanization system for translating hangeul into English.

Putting It All Together

Now that we've covered the consonants, vowels, and syllable blocks, let's put them all together to make words.

Let's try writing out *hangeul* in *hangeul*!

Han-geul, is written with two syllable blocks. The first block will contain the characters to spell "han" - ㅎ , ㅏ , ㄴ and the second will contain the characters for "geul" - ㄱ , ㅡ , ㄹ . The first syllable has a vertical vowel and the second syllable has a horizontal vowel. The syllables both end with a consonant, so the syllable blocks will look like this:



$\text{ㅎ} + \text{ㅏ} + \text{ㄴ}$
 $+ \text{ㄹ} = \text{글}$

$h + a + n = \text{han}$

한

$= \text{한} \quad \text{ㄱ} + \text{ㅡ}$

$g + eu + l = \text{geul}$

글

Examples

차 - cha - tea

커피 - keopi - coffee

김치 - kimchi - spicy fermented cabbage

한복 - hanbok - traditional Korean clothes

조선 - joseon - Joseon dynasty

사랑 - sarang - love

갓 - gat - black hat with wide brim worn by upper class men in Joseon

나비 - nabi - butterfly

책 - chek - book

우유 - uyu - milk

금 - geum - gold

Practice

Write the pronunciation on the blank.

노리개 _____ -knotted
trinkets

사과 _____ - apple

치마 _____ - skirt

손 _____ -hand

왕 _____ -king

소주 _____ -Korean liquor

불 _____ -fire

사람 _____ -person

왕비 _____ -queen

검 _____ -sword

옷 _____ -clothes

Research Terms

Here is a list of words that you may find useful while researching Korean topics in the SCA. Sometimes just using the *hangeul* will help you find more images or resources.

Clothing

한복 – hanbok – Korean traditional clothing

치마 – chima – skirt

저고리 – jeogori – jacket

속저고리 – sokjeogori – inner jacket

적삼 – jeoksam – unlined jacket, usually worn in summer

버선 – beoseon – traditional socks

바지 – baji – pants

도포 – dopo – men's coat

관복 – gwanbok – court official's attire

단령 – danryeong – round collared robe

흉배 – hyungbae – rank badges worn on chest and back

Accessories

노리개 – norigae – decorative knots and tassels

매듭 – maedup – decorative knotting technique

비녀 – binyeo – hairpin

갓 – gat – traditional men's hat – wide brim made with rice and nuruk, a yeast cake

사모 – samo – winged men's hat

주머니 – jumeoni – pouch

귀주머니 – gwijumeoni – eared pouch

두루주머니 – durujumeoni – rounded/ball shaped pouch

가चे – gache – big hair pieces

Time Periods

삼국 – samguk – Three Kingdoms (57 BC – 668 AD)

백제 – Baekje (18 BC – 660 AD)

고구려 – Goguryeo (37 BC – 668 AD)

신라 – Silla – (57 BC – 938 AD)

통일신라 – tongilSilla – Unified Silla – (668 AD – 935 AD)

고려 – Goryeo (918 AD – 1392 AD)

조선 – Joseon – (1392 AD – 1897 AD)

Food and Drink

김치 – kimchi – spicy fermented cabbage, but refers to the process of fermenting food

막걸리 – makgeolli – milky alcoholic drink

소주 – soju – distilled liquor made from rice

밥 – bap – rice or meal

냉면 – naengmyeon – cold noodles

국 – kuk – soup

음식 – eumshik – food

술 – sul – alcohol

물 – mul – water

Techniques and Misc. Terms

누비 – nubi – traditional quilting

침선 – chimseon – traditional sewing

한지 – hanji – traditional mulberry paper

자수 – jasu – embroidery

규방 – gyubang – “women's room,” handicrafts made by women who were usually inside the house most of the time during Joseon

전통 – jeontong – traditional

Additional Resources

Interested in learning more *hangeul* and Korean? Check out these resources:

How To Study Korean - <https://www.howtostudykorean.com/>

Free website with lots of in-depth lessons and videos. There are digital worksheets and workbooks available, but you'll have to purchase them. This is a great resource if you're a great at self-study. I also suggest using the app/website **Memrise** (<https://www.memrise.com/course/126923/how-to-study-korean-unit-1-3/>) along with this website so you can practice the vocabulary in the same order as the lessons.

Talk To Me in Korean - <https://talktomeinkorean.com/>

Great website, app, and podcast with short, easy to understand Korean lessons on vocabulary, grammar, and commonly used phrases. There are free PDFs of the lessons so you can follow along with the dialogue and learn the vocabulary used. If you pay for premium, you get access to extra clips that are great for listening practice. They also sell textbooks and workbooks of their lessons, but I haven't personally used them.

Easy To Learn Korean - <https://easytolearnkorean.com/>

Cute blog that has individual pages that cover a single topic. There are tips of word usage and culture included on the pages, so it's also just interesting. The graphics are bright and cute, so it's easy to keep flipping through them. Good for small, bite-sized general topics, vocabulary, and concepts but it doesn't explain a lot of grammar.

Duolingo - <https://www.duolingo.com>

Language learning app and website that offers a Korean course. Free version has a lot of ads, which can be annoying, and it doesn't explain grammar, so you learn from guessing and repetition. I prefer using the How to Study Korean course on Memrise over Duolingo, but Duolingo is a good way to start if you're brand new to Korean.

italki - <https://www.italki.com/>

italki is a website where you can learn one-on-one from tutors and teachers. The tutors charge per hour but will usually have a trial rate so you can see if they will be a good fit for you. This would be a good way to get a more customized lesson plan if you need something more or want to focus on a certain skill, like improving your reading or speaking. You do have to work around the tutor's schedule, which may be hard depending where the tutor lives.

Notes:

I am not fluent in Korean. I put together this handout to help others with reading and pronouncing Korean and for those who want to start reasearching with Korean terms. There may be mistakes in my handout and not all the rules and exceptions in *hangeul* are covered.

If you find a mistake or have questions, please feel free to contact me:

seongmyeongsu.sca@gmail.com

<http://www.dellacivetta.org/goldandjade/>